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GI Religion and Post-War Revival in the United States and Great Britain

The lineaments of the post-war revival of religion in the United States are well known. In the words of Patrick Allitt, the immediate post-war years witnessed a 'surprising turn to traditional religion'.¹ Analysing this phenomenon in the mid-1950s, the Jewish sociologist, theologian and former member of the Communist party, Will Herberg, pronounced 'That there has in recent years been an upswing of religion in the United States can hardly be doubted; the evidence is diverse, converging, and unequivocal beyond all possibilities of error.'² Among its prime facets, Herberg cited the ubiquity of religious self-identification. When asked to state their religious preference, '95 per cent of the American people' chose to identify themselves as Protestants, Catholics, or Jews; in other words, so Herberg went on, 'virtually the entire body of the American people, in every part of the country and in every section of society, regard themselves as belonging to some religious community'.³ Nor was this remarkable religious consensus in any way threatened by the reticent or the irreligious, as the prevailing dynamic of religious belonging had 'led to the virtual disappearance of anti-religious prejudice'. As Herberg pronounced, 'The old-time "village atheist" is a thing of the past, a folk curiosity like the town crier'.⁴ However, perhaps the best indicator of what Herberg branded 'The Contemporary Upswing in Religion' was the growing proportion of Americans who were considered to be church members; by 1953, this amounted to 59.5 per cent of the population, 'marking an all-time high in the nation's history'.⁵ However, even this headline figure disguised the true situation for, as Herberg pointed out, 'considerably more Americans regard themselves as church members than the statistics of church affiliation would indicate'. Taking into account the views of the man or woman in the street, rather than church membership norms or the opinion of religious statisticians: About 70 to 75 per cent of the American people, it may be safely estimated, regard themselves as members of churches; another 20 or 25 per cent locate themselves in one or another religious community without a consciousness of actual church membership- they constitute a 'fringe of

sympathetic bystanders,' so to speak. Only about five per cent of the American people consider themselves outside the religious fold altogether.⁶

Furthermore, church attendance was 'certainly increasing', the rate of Sunday school enrolments was easily outstripping the rate of population growth, and vast sums were being ploughed into church-building projects, 'particularly in the suburbs of the big cities'. By 1953, 'The value of new "religious buildings"' had soared to \$474 million, representing a more than six-fold increase since 1946.⁷

Not noted by Herberg, but no less emblematic of the quickening pulse of American religious life, was the dramatic resurgence of evangelical Protestantism in the national arena, a phenomenon marked by the advent of Billy Graham as the nation's foremost evangelist through his Los Angeles and Boston crusades of 1949-50.⁸ However, despite Graham's patent charisma, the conspicuous power of his preaching, and the compelling nature of his message, it is significant that his breakthrough was achieved at a point when the stock of the clergy in general had already reached new heights in American society. In 1942, polls had shown that the American public ranked 'religious leaders' after 'government leaders' and 'business leaders' in terms of 'doing the most good'; by 1947, religious leaders were foremost in terms of public esteem, with a third of all Americans rating them as the leading contributors to public wellbeing. By 1953, this proportion had risen to 40 per cent, prompting Elmo Roper to declare that 'No other group –whether government, Congressional, business, or labor- came anywhere near matching the prestige and pulling power of the men who are the ministers of God.'⁹ Furthermore, and whereas religious convictions had substantially underpinned the pacifism, isolationism and even timidity of the pre-war United States, religious militancy flavoured the bullishness of post-war American foreign policy and national identity. As the American Institute of Public Opinion (AIPO) discovered less than a month before Pearl Harbor, 55 per cent of Americans felt that their clergy should not 'discuss from the pulpit the question of

American participation in the war'; furthermore, and of those who disagreed, by far the largest group thought that the message to be conveyed was that the 'United States stay out of the war'.¹⁰ In contrast, and as containment and Cold War unfolded into the 1950s, evangelicals and Catholics in particular –the most expansive and arriviste elements in American religious life –were outspoken in their anti-Communism, sometimes heedless of its implications in a nuclear age.¹¹ This spirit also infused the broader realm of American civil religion for, as Herberg recognised, 'Confronted with the demonic threat of Communist totalitarianism, we are driven to look beyond the routine ideas and attitudes that may have served in easier times... in this latter conflict religion commends itself as our greatest resource and most powerful "secret weapon"'.¹² Significantly, in 1954, the year before Herberg published *Protestant-Catholic-Jew*, his classic study of post-war American religion, Congress added the phrase 'under God' to the Pledge of Allegiance and, in 1956, established 'In God We Trust' as the national motto.¹³

Whatever the qualitative limitations of the post-war revival, and however reliable polling methods may have been in capturing the religious beliefs and behaviour of contemporary Americans, much had clearly changed since the 1930s. Although Robert T. Handy's diagnosis of an inter-war 'American Religious Depression' requires considerable qualification, it was by no means mistaken. For this was indeed a 'bleak period' for the Protestant mainstream. Despite a series of notable mergers and reconciliations, there were worrying symptoms of decline among many of the principal Protestant churches. Torn by controversy between modernists and fundamentalists, they saw falling attendances and Sunday school enrolments, a decline in Sunday services, and the ebbing of missionary enthusiasm at home and abroad.¹⁴ The onset of the Great Depression after 1929 only served to exacerbate the situation, among its other effects weakening 'American religious institutions' power to face social crisis and alleviate individual suffering'.¹⁵ Meanwhile, the repeal of Prohibition in 1933 – according to Sydney E. Ahlstrom 'the greatest blow to their pride and self-

confidence that Protestants as a collective body had ever experienced' - added to the woes of Protestant America.¹⁶ Granted, the situation was better outside the Protestant mainstream. Under the impact of the Depression and of internal migration from the southern 'Dust Bowl' states, conservative, fundamentalist and Pentecostal churches grew geographically as well as numerically, a pattern that was also true of the African American churches, with migration from the rural south feeding their expansion in the cities of the industrial north.¹⁷ Although mainly rooted in the larger cities of the northeast, America's Jewish communities likewise witnessed significant growth in the inter-war years; partly as a result of renewed immigration from eastern Europe in the immediate aftermath of World War I, America's Jewish (and largely Orthodox) population increased by more than 20 per cent between 1917 and 1937.¹⁸ Despite the tightening of immigration controls in the 1920s, Roman Catholicism also flourished in its northern, urban heartlands. If Catholic numbers stabilised, Catholic organisation increased and Catholic devotional life intensified. Catholics also became more assertive on the national stage, their growing political clout reflected in the nomination of Al Smith as the Democratic presidential candidate in 1928 and in the judicial and governmental appointments of the Roosevelt administration.¹⁹ Nonetheless, and however mixed denominational fortunes may have been, the general outlook was clear. In a poll undertaken for *Fortune* magazine in January 1937, 49.9 per cent of respondents –by far the largest category– concurred that religion was 'losing influence in the life of the nation'.²⁰ Furthermore, when Americans were asked by AIPO pollsters in February 1939 whether they went to church more or less often than their parents, 50 per cent answered less.²¹ And the trend continued; national church attendance fell to a low of 37 per cent in November 1940, down four percentage points on February 1939.²² Nor did the relatively new and vaunted power of religious broadcasting seem to be stemming the tide. In February 1939 only 31 per cent of Americans claimed to have listened 'to any church services on the radio last Sunday', and only 5 per cent of non-attenders even mentioned listening to the radio as their chief Sunday diversion.²³

Despite Ahlstrom's perceptive deduction that 'the "post-war revival" began long before the fighting ceased',²⁴ the causes of America's post-war religious boom have usually been identified as lying in the circumstances of the immediate post-war years, a 'heady period of affluence and revival' and an age that reacted against the pandemic of loose-living, juvenile delinquency, and marital infidelity let loose by the war.²⁵ In addition to what Herberg identified as the primary place of religion, rather than ethnicity, as 'the differentiating element and the context of self-identification and social location' for third generation immigrants,²⁶ the drivers of the post-war revival have been identified in a general desire for consolation in the bleak dawn of the nuclear age; in the post-war prosperity, expansion and conformism of America's 'new suburban middle-class society', and in the baby boom and heightened family-centeredness of post-war America.²⁷ Part of this picture, it has been conceded, was a long-term reaction to the experience of World War II, notably its adverse effects on family life, its revelations of the perils posed by scientific progress and secular utopianisms, and even its lack of opportunity for church building despite the new affluence of the war years.²⁸ Nevertheless, and long before *Protestant-Catholic-Jew* presented its seminal appraisal of contemporary religious life in America, other pundits had sensed that the religious landscape had already shifted under the impact of war. In 1952, for example, the philosopher Herbert Wallace Schneider remarked in *Religion in 20th Century America* that 'the years of war' had 'contributed a wealth of religious emotion and meaning to American patriotism and politics'.²⁹ More significantly, in 1948 contributors to an issue of the *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* devoted to 'Organized Religion in the United States' had discerned some critical continuities and developments. J.O. Hertzler, a professor of sociology at the University of Nebraska, recognised that, no less than in the past, 'when men are suffering from man-made catastrophe – war, revolution, economic depression - religion gives them, individually and in groups, great solace'.³⁰ Ray H. Abrams, an assistant professor of sociology at the University of Pennsylvania and the author of *Preachers Present Arms* (1933), an influential 'arraignment' of the clergy's conduct in World War I,³¹ acknowledged that in World War II 'the forces of organized religion played an important part in the

struggle of the ideologies'.³² Furthermore, he even expressed some sympathy for the perception of World War II held by most American Christians:

Though war is recognized as a tragedy, fighting to preserve a Christian civilization against the 'paganism' of the Axis is essentially waging war to defeat the enemies of Christ. When it became apparent that World War II was a fight to the finish, not many of even the pacifists could honestly say that it made no difference to them which side won.³³

Given the mobilisation, dislocation and exigencies of the war years, church attendance figures are probably not the best indicators of the emerging wartime mood. Nevertheless, in terms of general religious practice and susceptibilities, pollsters and pundits detected some new wartime trends. According to one AIPO poll, Sunday church attendance had slipped to around 36 per cent of the population by May 1942.³⁴ However, and while more Americans admitted to going to church less often than otherwise over the previous year (19 per cent as opposed to 13 per cent),³⁵ AIPO pollsters also found that 47 per cent of Americans had 'noticed an increase in interest in religion' in their communities in the months since Pearl Harbor (only 31 per cent said they had not).³⁶ According to the AIPO, more Americans were reading the Bible at home in 1943 and 1944 than in 1942 (64 and 62 per cent as opposed to 59 per cent), and the overwhelming majority of those who adjusted the frequency of their Bible-reading were turning more often to the Good Book.³⁷ At the same time, belief in immortality was resurgent. In 1936, 36 per cent of Americans had claimed not to believe in an afterlife; by 1944, this proportion had fallen to only 13 per cent.³⁸ Furthermore, there was a heightened interest in religious books and films. For example, 1942 saw the publication of Lloyd C. Douglas's novel *The Robe*, described as 'one of the great successes of publishing history' and, as things turned out, the nation's bestselling book for nearly a year.³⁹ In the words of the May 1943 issue of *The Link*, a magazine aimed at mainline Protestants in the armed forces:

According to the book-sellers' trade journal, *Publishers' Weekly*, religious books are in such demand that publishers are unable to keep up. Denominational book houses report increases from 31 to 110 per cent over a year ago. And in the general publishing field the story is the same. A survey has further revealed that by far the greatest sales are to laymen. The publishers cautiously admit this may be the sign of a "great revival of religion."⁴⁰

In March 1944, *The Link* reported that 'Every major studio has announced at least one religious picture for the year, and MGM has scheduled four... Hollywood admits there is a "religious cycle" in the making'.⁴¹ On the home front, and at grassroots level, a popular and spontaneous recourse to prayer was manifested by the emergence of countless local prayer groups, some of which were to make a seamless transition to the demands of the Cold War.⁴² In the Catholic diocese of Peoria, 1942 commenced with the inauguration of a new 'Prayer Front' consisting of 'an unending chain of rosaries and a Daily Mass crusade'; in the words of its bishop, 'The Western Front, the Home Front, the Atlantic Front, are all depending on the Prayer Front'.⁴³ In wider terms, this resurgence of religion was punctuated and encouraged by national days of prayer. As the archpriest of American civil religion, in 1942 and 1943 President Roosevelt set aside New Year's Day and Thanksgiving Day 'to "solemnly express our dependence on Almighty God"'.⁴⁴ Furthermore, the D-Day landings in June 1944 were accompanied by a carefully planned, nationwide bombardment of the throne of grace; led by the President himself, this was billed by *The Link* as 'the greatest wave of mass intercession in history'.⁴⁵

Discussing wartime religion on WGN's Northwestern University Reviewing Stand in September 1944, three clergymen (Lutheran, Episcopalian and Jewish) 'admitted that church attendance has greatly increased since the war began', but none ventured that this amounted to a revival. One, however, did acknowledge that 'the much more extensive use of prayer, and increased sales of religious books... might add up to some sort of revival differing in nature from historic

revivals of the past'.⁴⁶ Although the ferment of the war years saw the advent and expansion of the Youth for Christ movement,⁴⁷ from the perspective of the evangelical revivalist tradition these wider religious developments in wartime American society in no way resembled 'a time of extraordinary religious awakening',⁴⁸ intimations of which were only to come with the successes of Billy Graham several years later. However, if we understand periods of religious revival more broadly, as those which saw a marked increase in church membership relative to the American population as a whole,⁴⁹ then the years of World War II were indeed years of revival. According to the biennial *Yearbook of American Churches*, in the decade 1930-40 the growth in total church membership (a constant of American religious life since at least 1890)⁵⁰ barely kept pace with that of the population, being 7.86 per cent as compared to 7.2 per cent.⁵¹ However, by 1941-42, and whereas the population had grown by 9.1 per cent since 1930, total church membership had soared by 12.9 per cent and 'The total reported for church membership was 50.3 per cent of the total population... the highest proportion ever'.⁵² By 1943-44, this proportion had risen yet again to 52.5 per cent.⁵³ Significantly, in 1948, and scrutinising pre and post-war patterns of religious affiliation for the *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Liston Pope, professor of social ethics at Yale, observed that 'all the major religious bodies in the United States now draw a far higher percentage of their members from the lower class than they did before World War II'.⁵⁴

Historians' longstanding reluctance to delve into the religious experience of World War II reflects an unhealthy pattern in the study of western Christianity in the twentieth century. In this dynamic and expansive field, the two World Wars (like so many conflicts before them) tend to be treated as historiographical bookends, falling between other periods and hardly worthy of examination in their own right. It might, of course, be claimed that war –especially world war- is an aberration, and that such study may distort rather than clarify more settled patterns and trends. Equally, however, it can be argued that the experience of these global conflicts, and of the cultural

mobilisation they entailed in belligerent societies, unleashed new religious forces and exposed the underlying vitality, dynamics and priorities of different religious cultures. Furthermore, and in an era of total war and mass mobilisation, it seems evident that military institutions and military experience stood to play a major role in moulding the religious identities and attitudes of their members (who were generally young, and overwhelmingly male) and in thereby shaping the post-war religious landscape. Significantly, and in the case of the United States, so much has been accepted by Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell in their landmark study *American Grace*, which identified high levels of churchgoing and church membership as yet another attribute of the fabled 'Greatest Generation'. According to their figures, 80 per cent of American men born in the 1920s 'served in the military in World War II', and thus became eligible for the many financial, educational, and other benefits conferred upon veterans by the GI Bill. The effects for American religion were momentous. As Putnam and Campbell put it:

It was this GI generation who as young husbands and fathers, together with their wives, led the surge to church in the late 1940s and 1950s [and] this cohort would remain unusually observant for the rest of their lives. Throughout all the shocks and aftershocks of the ensuing half century and even into the next millennium the GIs and their wives and widows would form the bedrock of American religious institutions...⁵⁵

However, and given the paucity of studies on their religious experience in the war years, Putnam and Campbell were unable to account for their religious enthusiasm, other than to see in it a craving for social respectability, or perhaps a distant echo of foxhole religion.⁵⁶ It is the purpose of the remainder of this chapter to provide a fuller explanation of the formative influence of military service on the texture and configuration of post-war American religion.

From the outset, it must be emphasized that religion mattered in the American military, and

that its claims and influence could not be escaped by the 16.3 million men and women who served in the nation's armed forces in World War II.⁵⁷ Despite the fact that 'the military environment' was traditionally believed to exercise 'a particularly corrupting influence',⁵⁸ religion was deeply embedded in the institutional culture of the army and the navy. In their oaths of enlistment and oaths of office, enlisted and commissioned personnel invoked the help of the Almighty;⁵⁹ the free exercise clause of the First Amendment gave a constitutional underpinning to the ministry of military chaplains, and the Articles of War and Articles for the Government of the United States Navy were derived from British models that pre-dated the Revolution and were coloured by a profound sense of religious obligation and Christian morality.⁶⁰ Furthermore, and although not mentioned by Herberg in his study of America's "triple melting pot",⁶¹ a sense of religious identity within the overarching, tripartite religious division of post-war American society had a formative precursor in the wartime military. On induction, recruits were asked their religious preference,⁶² which was duly noted on their service records, and they also had the option of having it stamped on their identification tags under one of three codes- 'P' (Protestant), 'C' (Catholic) and 'H' (Hebrew). These tags had to be worn at all times, and contemporaries noted how very few recruits were professing atheists ('perhaps not one in a thousand', according to one senior chaplain at Great Lakes Naval Training Station).⁶³ If service personnel therefore lived with an identity that they may have worn lightly, if at all, in civilian life, they also died with it. According to American military policy, all burials were conducted according to Jewish or Christian rites and all graves were marked with a cross or a Star of David.⁶⁴ In time, and in keeping with a policy established after World War I, the American Battle Monuments Commission would supply 'a headstone of pristine white marble', again either a Latin cross or a Star of David, and provide each of its cemeteries with its own 'nonsectarian' chapel. Significantly, attempts to differentiate Protestants according to denomination, to secure recognition of an additional Eastern Orthodox category, or for some Japanese-American soldiers to be registered as Buddhist were simply brushed aside. In other words, a regime existed in the armed forces throughout World War II that became very familiar to civilian society in the post-war years. As

Herberg averred:

Unless one is either a Protestant, or a Catholic, or a Jew, one is a 'nothing'; to be a 'something,' to have a name, one must identify oneself to oneself, and be identified by others, as belonging to one or another of the three great religious communities in which the American people are divided.⁶⁵

In other respects, America's military very much honoured the principle of freedom *of* religion rather than freedom *from* religion, and strenuous efforts could be made to ensure that service life did not unduly hamper religious observance. Among the army's logistical problems in Europe was that of ensuring an adequate supply of foodstuffs for Jewish religious festivals.⁶⁶ Moreover, and though technically forbidden, in exercising what they thought to be the responsibilities and prerogatives of command, it was not unusual for more senior officers to require the attendance of their soldiers at public worship. Most notably, memorial and thanksgiving services offered considerable scope for compulsion while limiting that for dissent. After its return from Normandy in the late summer of 1944, for example, a regiment of the 101st Airborne Division was paraded for an obligatory memorial service in the grounds of Littlecote House, Wiltshire. This featured a sermon, an address by Major General Maxwell D. Taylor, the reading of the adopted regimental prayer (composed by one of its lieutenants) and a recitation of the names of the dead and missing. At the conclusion of the service, 2,000 survivors, duly attired in their best uniforms, marched away to the strains of 'Onward Christian Soldiers'. In such scenarios, army regulations, or indeed the First Amendment, counted for nothing.⁶⁷ In the navy, the situation was worse still for, following a precedent set in the late nineteenth-century navy, trainee seamen were still obliged to attend church. Hundreds of thousands of bluejackets were thus compelled to attend public worship while in training- that is, until the Secretary of the Navy, James V. Forrestal, a deeply lapsed Catholic, put paid to the practice in November 1944. In this case, Forrestal rebuked commanding officers for disregarding objections to compulsory services, stressing that 'military necessity does not require disregard of the basic constitutional guarantees inherent in our Democracy, which permit complete

freedom of conscience and religious worship for all citizens'. He went on to direct that, 'those who do not wish to participate in such services shall be excused therefrom'.⁶⁸ However, this injunction had no effect on the countless ships on which religious services, and even daily prayers, were routinely relayed through public address systems.

Evidently, Jefferson's metaphorical wall of separation between church and state was poorly maintained in the military. Nevertheless, this situation was not dissimilar from that in civilian society, where the encroachments of religion were marked, for example, in 'the introduction of religious materials in the public schools', and in 'the presence of sectarian religious workers and teachers on state university campuses'.⁶⁹ However, the pressure of the world wars further weakened this crumbling boundary. As Herbert Wallace Schneider noted, presidents Wilson and Roosevelt 'did not hesitate to include religious appeals and sentiments in their public utterances and documents during wartime' and, 'Though such sentiments were received cordially by most citizens, they served to stir up the wrath of the dwindling band of radical secularists who objected even to chaplains in the military service.'⁷⁰ In fact, chaplaincy provision for the armed forces had never been as lavish as in World War II. With the coming of the draft in 1940, much of the religious work that had been previously undertaken by civilian voluntary organisations such as the YMCA and the American Bible Society was simply absorbed by the War Department. It set about providing 'religious services and training for all denominations similar to those found in the average city parish',⁷¹ relied on a large and well-resourced Corps of Chaplains, and generally sought to honour George C. Marshall's assurance to the nation that 'There should be no fear that any young man will suffer spiritual loss during the period of his military service... on the contrary, we hope that the young soldier will return to his home with a keener understanding of the sacred ideals for which our churches stand.'⁷² In providing a host of trained chaplains armed with equipment ranging from jeeps, trailers and portable organs to paper communion cups, the War Department in particular was moving in new directions; in World War I, a much smaller band of chaplains (in absolute and in relative terms) could

scarcely expect the use of a tent, or hope to compete with the YMCA.⁷³ In another unprecedented step, and ostensibly at the instigation of a Mrs Evelyn Kohlstedt of Ayrshire, Iowa, the War Department even developed a new line in colportage, from July 1941 issuing a New Testament or other portion of scripture to every soldier who requested one.⁷⁴ Fulfilling a desideratum of the most fervent evangelical, each khaki testament included a foreword written by the president (leading critics to remark that only Franklin Delano Roosevelt could see fit to add to Holy Writ), and came with the inscription 'Presented by the Army of the United States'. At the same time, and while the dilapidation of so many civilian churches and church buildings betrayed the effects of the Depression,⁷⁵ the War Department embarked on a mammoth church-building project; between March 1941 and September 1945, more than 1,500 army chapels were built in the United States, with over \$32 million of appropriated funds being spent on structures that were solely for use as army chapels. Furthermore, almost a hundred new chapels were built at naval installations in the United States, and dozens more in Alaska, the Caribbean and Hawaii. Besides representing a widening breach of the wall of separation, these chapels very much symbolised a profound fusion of religious faith and national identity, the design of army chapels being based on 'the small country churches which dot the countryside of America', and on 'the typical small church found in every community'.⁷⁶

The benefits of these investments and innovations were certainly felt in post-war society, not least in the disposal of mountains of army surplus. By 1948 'over one million Army-issue portions of the Scriptures had been distributed, free of charge, to religious, educational and civic institutions' and, by 1949, nearly half of the army's wartime, timber chapels had been sold to civilian congregations by the War Assets Administration.⁷⁷ However, less tangible legacies of military service also defined and fuelled the post-war revival. Acclaimed by Herberg in 1955 as 'the highest expression of religious coexistence and co-operation within the American understanding of religion',⁷⁸ and celebrated for its progress since the 1920s (to the point that 'virtually every civic

enterprise possessing any moral, cultural, or spiritual aspect is today thought of, and where possible organized, along interfaith –that is, tripartite- lines’),⁷⁹ the interfaith movement arguably received its most powerful boost from the American military during the years of World War II. Long before an interfaith Congressional Prayer Room graced the Capitol,⁸⁰ all of the army’s new chapels, and many of the navy’s, were designed to be ‘interfaith’, incorporating features that made them adaptable to the worship of Catholics, Protestants and Jews alike. However bland and restrictive to some, the inclusiveness of these army chapels was hailed by others as uniquely American. Speaking at the opening of the army’s first ‘mobilization-type’ chapel at Arlington in July 1941, the Quartermaster General, a hitherto unlikely champion of the interfaith movement, averred that:

The most significant feature of every chapel... is an altar which is designed so that it can be moved and adapted to the services of any denomination. There is nothing in construction that could stamp it as so distinctively American as this altar, because only in a free country could you find a church built to be used for worship by Catholic, Protestant and Jew alike.⁸¹

Such was the promotion of religious harmony by the American military that its chaplains (all of whom were volunteers) served as virtual ambassadors for the principles of the National Conference of Christians and Jews, even leading interfaith services when appropriate. Indeed, the apotheosis of the interfaith movement in the war years came in the self-sacrifice and ensuing cult of the Four Chaplains, chaplains of the three faiths who gave their lifejackets away before praying, singing hymns and dying together on their stricken transport ship in February 1943.⁸² Hailed as ultimate exemplars of America’s emergent ‘Judeo-Christian’ identity,⁸³ the sacrifice and significance of the Four Chaplains had a deep resonance in the post-war years. In 1948, and as a result of a special ‘congressional waiver’ that allowed their depiction only five years after their deaths, a three-cent postage stamp was issued bearing their portraits and carrying the legend ‘These IMMORTAL CHAPLAINS... INTERFAITH IN ACTION’.⁸⁴ Three years later, and against the backdrop of the Korean War, part of the unfolding battle against communism (which, according to Herberg, was also very

much 'an interfaith venture'),⁸⁵ President Truman dedicated an interfaith chapel to the memory of the Four Chaplains at Philadelphia's Grace Baptist Temple, a chapel that featured 'Catholic, Jewish and Protestant altars' and was funded to the tune of \$300,000 'contributed by Americans of all faiths'.⁸⁶

Significantly, the most widely touted reason for the religious susceptibility of veterans – namely the lasting effects of 'foxhole religion' – may say more about the instincts and predicament of a society living under the shadow of nuclear apocalypse than it does about actual wartime experience. In fact, and because of the highly mechanised nature of the army, its multifarious needs, and its deployment across much of the globe, only a fraction of GIs served in the army's front-line combat forces, whether on the ground or in the air. A similar situation obtained in the navy, and Gerald F. Linderman has estimated the proportion of service personnel who saw 'extended combat' at less than 5 per cent of the whole.⁸⁷ Consequently, it is hard to see how the long-term effects of combat –however broadly defined– conditioned the post-war revival to any meaningful extent. Moreover, the subject of foxhole religion had been widely debated, even by civilian pundits, during the war itself, and it was generally agreed that its symptoms were uneven and its effects usually fleeting. In short, it was simply a more dramatic, wartime manifestation of a pronounced (and, no doubt, perennial) trait in civilian religious life. According to the findings of a nationwide survey of 2,500 respondents published in 1947, 'Provides help in times of stress' was the third most popular answer among sixty-five to the question of why they were religious, coming after 'Gives meaning to life' and 'Motivates human kindness'.⁸⁸ As one pundit drily remarked of his fellow Americans, 'the vast majority take religion for granted as a ready help in time of trouble, not as something requiring a daily regimen'.⁸⁹

A far more significant and pervasive factor in the religious experience of returning veterans was the extent to which they had accepted and internalised the military's emphasis on the

importance of religion. Again, this was consistent with prevailing trends in civilian society, where, as Schneider observed with reference to many apparent infractions of the First Amendment, 'The great majority of presumably religious Americans allowed these encroachments on the strict "neutrality" of the state to accumulate with relatively little concern or with ineffective opposition.'⁹⁰ However, this was not simply a picture of tacit acceptance occasionally tempered with mild resistance. As Deborah Dash Moore has shown, the privileged place of religion in the American military had a transformative impact on Jewish identity in post-war America, for 'In the American armed forces, Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, nonobservant Jews, and secularists (including Labor Zionists, Socialists, and Communists) all came together under a Jewish religious framework.'⁹¹ Similarly, the religious organization of the American military, and the deployment of its Catholic chaplains, took no account of the ethnic peculiarities of American Catholicism, and thus helped to hasten the perceived 'demise of the immigrant church' and the decline of Catholic national parishes in the post-war years.⁹²

Among its other effects, what is certainly striking is the overwhelmingly positive response of service personnel to what could well be described as a state-led revival in the armed forces. In his 1961 history of Air Force chaplaincy, Daniel B. Jorgensen pointed out that 'The emphasis of the United States on religion in service by building hundreds of chapels, printing and distributing millions of copies of scriptures, and commissioning thousands of clergymen as chaplains represented the greatest investment of money and personnel that our government had ever undertaken for religion in its history.'⁹³ A senior Lutheran army chaplain, Gynther Storaasli, made the same point more directly in July 1943 when he stressed that 'Our government, not our churches, mind you, has taken the initiative and has set in motion a back-to-the-church, back-to-the-Bible, back-to-God movement the like of which church men, laymen and preachers, may have dreamed about but never thought could come to pass.'⁹⁴ In that respect, the returns were impressive. Towards the end of the war, a number of local surveys established that chaplains had been greatly valued and that veterans were

eager to become involved in the civilian church. In 1945, for example, a survey of 2,985 officers and enlisted men from five theatres of war who passed through the USAAF's Redistribution Center at Santa Ana, California, found that those who reacted favourably to their chaplains were in a clear majority- ranging from 76 per cent among Catholics to 66 per cent among Jews and 60 per cent among Protestants; those whose reaction was 'Unfavorable' represented minorities of only 8, 10 and 6 per cent respectively. Favourable verdicts included statements such as 'Chaplains are doing a grand job', 'The Chaplain served as a substitute for parents', and 'his prayers at briefing and at the take-off were greatly appreciated'. Remarkably, the most frequent comment among those whose reaction was unfavourable was the double-edged claim that 'there were not enough chaplains'. The same survey also revealed that overseas service especially had engendered a widespread change in religious attitudes- affecting 45 per cent of Catholics, 41 per cent of Jews, 39 per cent of Protestants and 32 per cent of the unaffiliated. In all four categories, the direction of this change was overwhelmingly positive, affecting 98 per cent of Catholics, 91 per cent of Jews, 99 per cent of Protestants and 100 per cent of the unaffiliated. Significantly, the proximity of danger was cited by only a small minority as the reason for this change, the principal reason given by Protestants, Catholics and Jews alike being that 'Army life brought [a] new appreciation and understand[ing] of religion'. Likewise, in April 1945 nearly 4,000 GIs in Europe were asked to specify which organizations they were active in before the war, and which they intended to be active in on their return to civilian life. The church led the field in both cases by a very considerable margin. Although it strained the bounds of credibility that 62 per cent of non-high school graduates and 72 per cent of high school graduates were, as they claimed, 'active' in their churches before the war, 72 and 78 per cent stated that they wished to be active on their return. As one commentator put it, 'Whether the men were as fully integrated... as they wanted to believe is less important than the fact that they wanted to believe it and that they expected to be even more active after the war than before the war.'⁹⁵ In view of such evidence, it is hard not to discern an echo of this wartime experience in the 'Back to God' campaign of the American Legion in the early 1950s, and the vocal support of

veterans' groups to the revision of the oath of allegiance in 1954.⁹⁶

In addition to the apparent success of state-sponsored religion in the armed forces, other legacies of service in World War II also fed and shaped the post-war revival. The war against Japan, for example, fought amidst the historic mission fields of Asia and the Pacific, helped re-energise America's overseas missions. As Joel Carpenter has emphasised, the struggle against Japan carried missionary fervour among fundamentalists to new heights, GI missionary interest leading to the formation of the Christian Airmen's Missionary Fellowship in 1945 and to the Far Eastern Gospel Crusade in 1947.⁹⁷ However, it also stoked missionary enthusiasm among mainline Protestants, and among Catholics, leading the eminent missiologist and historian Kenneth Scott Latourette to observe in 1948 that 'Protestant societies especially have been seeking out hundreds of new recruits, many of whom are found among men returning from the armed services. The Catholics also obtain large numbers of recruits from ex-service men.'⁹⁸ America's veterans, moreover, comprised a promising vineyard for domestic missionaries in their own right; far from evincing signs of protest atheism, a survey of 2,700 veterans conducted in the United States at the end of 1945 showed that the majority claimed that their army experience had increased their faith in God. Among men without combat experience, this was in the order of 54 per cent- more than three times the percentage of men who said their faith had decreased. Among combat veterans, the figures were even more striking; 79 per cent said that their army experience had increased their faith in God- more than four times the percentage of those who said their faith had diminished. Nevertheless, in both categories, those who claimed to feel 'less religious' (35 and 30 per cent respectively) exceeded those who felt the reverse by several percentage points.⁹⁹ The origins of this paradox seem clear enough; in World War II, the American military took men from a previously pacifistic and puritanical society, turned them into some of the most accomplished killers of their day, devastated large parts of the ecclesiastical infrastructure of Europe and Asia, and exposed them to a world of personal temptations worthy of *Pilgrim's Progress*.¹⁰⁰ In other words, their preoccupation with normal family life and middle-class

respectability were symptoms of a widespread need for personal redemption, and in that respect it seems highly significant that the most expansive force in post-war American religious life, a reinvigorated evangelical Protestantism, offered precisely this promise of personal salvation. It was, indeed, quite telling that the troubled Louis Zamperini, a celebrated Olympian and former prisoner of war, was one of the first of Graham's star converts in the Los Angeles Crusade of 1949.

Finally, it is worth underlining that the religious and moral character of the Cold War inherited the moral and religious polarities of World War II, in which America's soldiers, sailors, airmen and marines confronted the forces of pagan, apostate Nazism and of emperor-worshipping state Shinto. As William R. Arnold, the army's Chief of Chaplains, put it, with no hint of the 'cautious patriotism' that has been widely ascribed to the American churches in World War II:

This war is a different war. The hosts who face us are immeasurably strong and purposeful. The battle is fierce, and the issue is critical. The enemy is armed with all the clever devices of Lucifer himself, and his ugly aim is not the mere capture of land or material possessions, but the utter destruction of that spiritual wealth upon which the nations of democracy are founded... On the present vast battlefield where our armies of light struggle with those of darkness, the spiritual arm of the service must be a living, challenging, and conquering arm.¹⁰¹

However, it was not only chaplains who involved themselves in this spiritual, even cosmic struggle. As commanders of a citizen army drawn from the reluctant ranks of a believing and unwarlike society, the assurance they were fighting on the side of the angels was also freely provided by America's leading generals throughout World War II. Their favourite prayers, for example, helped fill the pages of a high-profile *Soldiers' and Sailors' Prayer Book* published in 1944, a 'non-sectarian collection of the finest prayers of the Protestant, Catholic and Jewish faiths' for the men and women of the armed forces.¹⁰² Though better remembered for his crusading rhetoric on

the eve of D-Day,¹⁰³ in 1944, and in language that prefigured the Manichaeian tropes of Cold War rhetoric, General Dwight D. Eisenhower made the following declaration on 'The Allied Soldier and Religion':

The Allied soldier sees himself as a defender of those great precepts of humanitarianism preached by Christ and exemplified in the way of life for which all true democracies stand. He sees this conflict as a war between these great principles and the forces of human greed and selfishness and love of power today typified in Nazism, Fascism and Shintoism... The Allied soldier is not often articulate in his profession of Christianity; but he is risking his life to uphold principles that are implicit alike in Democracy and Christianity: principles of justice, liberty and right among men of all stations, everywhere.¹⁰⁴

In other words, the 'public pieties' associated with Eisenhower even before his election as president in 1952 were part of the stock in trade of America's senior commanders in World War II, being common to Douglas MacArthur and George S. Patton, Eisenhower's principal rivals (according to the AIPO in 1945) for the accolade of 'the greatest United States army general in the war'.¹⁰⁵ Hence, though widely suspected of theological indifference and cast by Ahlstrom as the 'prestigious symbol of generalized religiosity and America's self-satisfied patriotic moralism',¹⁰⁶ Eisenhower brought to the presidency a well-grounded appreciation of the importance of an inclusive religiosity for the largely civilian garrison of fortress America.

In summary, the first decade of the post-war revival of religion in the United States cannot be understood simply in the context of short-term, post-war or even generational factors. Although a largely unwritten chapter in American religious history, in fighting World War II American society underwent profound upheavals, and American religion proved to be a major beneficiary. Evident from the home front, as Americans sought solace in their Bibles, in prayer and in old religious verities, this was especially true of the military milieu. In steeling millions of its citizen soldiers and

sailors for the sacrifices necessary in waging and winning a just war, the United States government promoted the historically privileged role of religion in the armed forces to the extent that a state-sponsored revival of religion seems to have been the result. In this process, millions of young Americans were compelled to own a religious identity, were brought into sympathetic contact with the clergy at a susceptible stage in their lives, and proved the unresisting beneficiaries of a religious and pastoral system that was lavishly resourced by the War and the Navy Departments.

Subsequently (and perhaps conveniently) confused with the effects of foxhole religion, the evidence suggests that America's veterans usually returned with a heightened belief in God, an apparent desire to partake in religious life as civilians, and in many cases with an uneasy conscience bestowed by the myriad moral vagaries of a global war. Their experience of World War II also fuelled a strong sense of national righteousness, a sense that Eisenhower articulated both as a World War II commander and, later, as a Cold War president. While the results of their experiences were to be felt in the longer term, the war in its manifold aspects clearly proved formative in the vaunted religiosity of the GI generation.

Why was the strength and pattern of this revival not reflected in Great Britain, especially as Britain's religious example and experience inspired so many Americans in World War II?¹⁰⁷ Reflected in films such as William Wyler's *Mrs. Miniver* (1942); in an admiration for the spiritual leadership of King George VI, Winston Churchill, and even Field Marshal Montgomery; and in such striking images as the dome of St. Paul's Cathedral standing unscathed amidst the London blitz, America's religious Anglophilia lingered on after the war. In 1945, for example, an Oscar-winning documentary on the last year of the war in Europe entitled *The True Glory* articulated a shared vision of the centrality of religion in the new, post-war world. Introduced by Eisenhower, and co-produced by America's Office of War Information and Britain's Ministry of Information, it concluded with the scene of a church still standing amidst a devastated townscape, and with an 'ancient prayer' by Sir Francis Drake, from which the film derived its title. However, the question of whether Britain's 'New

Jerusalem' witnessed a significant religious revival is a contested one, and one that seems to turn on whether greater stress is placed on quantitative or on qualitative evidence.¹⁰⁸ Despite a somewhat flimsy claim to the contrary, which hinges on heightened levels of inter-marriage, for which no compelling figures are available,¹⁰⁹ World War II seems not to have had a major impact on levels of religious belief or practice in Great Britain.¹¹⁰ However, the existential crisis it represented does seem to have reinforced the culturally defining role of Christianity in British society, a fact reflected in the religious provisions of the 1944 Education Act, in the religious panoply of the coronation of 1953, and (as Uta Balbier illustrates elsewhere in this volume) in the capacity of Billy Graham to act as a spiritual ambassador to Great Britain in the early years of the Cold War.

Britain's own 'greatest generation' clearly went on to play a significant role in church life in the decades after the war. Despite the upheavals of war, and as George MacDonald Fraser, one of their best memoirists, remembered, theirs was still an 'inhibited, pious and timid generation', very much governed by values acquired from 'church, school and family'.¹¹¹ As in the armed forces during World War II (when atheists had comprised much less than one per cent of the British army, for example)¹¹² levels of professed non-belief remained low in 1950s Britain, though not quite as low as in the United States.¹¹³ As late as the national census of 2001, the generation that fought World War II helped, at the very least, to sustain high levels of Christian self-identification and, in veterans such as Robert Runcie, Leonard Cheshire, and even Queen Elizabeth II, it produced Christian figures of international stature. But were Britain's veterans able to contribute to a national revival of religion on a scale and of a type to bear comparison with that in the United States? Emphatically not. Post-war Britain was a bleak, penurious and war-ravaged country, where much of the churches' built infrastructure had to be reconstructed from the rubble. If the clear and continuing ascendancy of the established churches of England and Scotland helped curtail a spirit of religious competition, the statist *zeitgeist* of the age entrusted Britain's public education system with the religious instruction and socialisation of the young (with arguably dire consequences in the longer term).¹¹⁴ The essential

conformism of British society was also reflected in its social inertia. As the Anglo-American historian Alan Allport has put it, whereas millions of American veterans were propelled by the GI Bill into the middle classes, in Britain 'After turning in their uniforms, four in five of the demobbed returned to the industrial working class from which they had come, their intelligence and talents as unrecognised, untapped and underutilised as they had been before the war.'¹¹⁵ While affluent America's increasingly middle-class veterans, and the churches they supported, reaped the benefits of a socially transformative GI Bill, the lack of a British equivalent represented 'a lost, never-to-be-repeated opportunity'.¹¹⁶ If this had long-term repercussions for British society at large, it also helps to account for the different post-war trajectories of religion in Great Britain and the United States.

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⁴ *Ibid*, p. 276.

⁵ *Ibid*, p. 60.

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⁹ Herberg, *Protestant, Catholic, Jew*, p. 64.

¹⁰ Hadley Cantril and Mildred Strunk, *Public Opinion, 1935-1946* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1951), p. 790.

¹¹ Andrew Preston, *Sword of the Spirit, Shield of Faith: Religion in American War and Diplomacy* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012), pp. 467-71; Allitt, *Religion in America*, pp. 22-25.

¹² Herberg, *Protestant, Catholic, Jew*, pp. 73-74.

¹³ Preston, *Sword of the Spirit*, p. 441.

¹⁴ Robert T. Handy, 'The American Religious Depression, 1925-1935.' *Church History* 29, no. 1 (1960), 3-16; Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People. Second Edition* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), p. 921.

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¹⁶ Ahlstrom, *Religious History*, pp. 921 and 925.

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- ²⁴ Ahlstrom, *Religious History*, p. 950.
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- ²⁸ Ibid, p. 76; Ahlstrom, *Religious History*, p. 950; Robert Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), pp. 26-27.
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